

# See the World, Save a Life

by Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts  
photo by Master Sgt. John Lasky

## Staff Sgt. Joshua Smith

Pararescueman, 31st Rescue Squadron, Kadena Air Base, Japan

**Years in Air Force:** 11

**Hometown:** Forest Grove, Ore.

**Reason for enlisting:** To become a firefighter and “to see what exactly was on the other side of the continent.”

**Assignments:** Patrick Air Force Base, Fla.; Moody Air Force Base, Ga.; Kadena

**Coming up:** Instructor duty at Kirtland Air Force Base, N.M.

**The best thing about the job:** “The ability to help people in need during trying times.”

Fate closed a door to the career ambitions of teenager Joshua Smith. It's ironic, perhaps, because what motivated the volunteer firefighter from Forest Grove, Ore., to become a professional firefighter was the “thrill of kicking down the door with a fire on the other side and putting it out.”

He loved the teamwork and the camaraderie demanded by the profession, especially during summer when his volunteer firefighting unit entered competitions using horse-drawn fire carts to put out fires the old-fashioned way.

But a two-year degree in fire science was beyond his financial grasp, so the small town 19-year-old joined the Air Force to seek a career through the armed forces and “to see what exactly was on the other side of the continent.”

After entering in the open-general category, he surprisingly found himself headed for a job in the computer-related career field. The Air Force career pathway seemed to be leading him farther astray from his career aspirations. Then one day during basic training someone came to talk about pararescue.

Intrigued by the sound of this mentally and physically demanding career field, he took the physical fitness test with full confidence, buoyed by a high school athletic background that included football, swimming and track. He flunked. Not enough sit-ups.

Certain that he was up to the task, he asked for a second chance and was initially turned down because of a mandatory three-year waiting period. But when his results were reviewed, they were so impressive in areas such as swimming, he was given the green light. This time he passed with flying colors. But he had only scratched the surface

to enter a career field that has a high washout rate.

## Not business as usual

That was more than 11 years ago, the staff sergeant said during a deployment to Djibouti as part of Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa — a mission to win the hearts and minds of Africans through stabilizing the region and discouraging the spread of terrorism. Although a peaceful mission, it required aircrews to travel vast distances, so the need to have rescue crews on hand was still required.

For most of the approximately 50 Airmen who were part of the 1,400 member coalition, the experience was a once-in-a-lifetime chance for duty in one of the world's most off-the-beaten pathways. That wasn't the case with Sergeant Smith, and that's why he “loves this job.”

“The things I get to do in this career field, you never get to do in any other. The places you go to in the world are awesome,” he said while taking a break preparing for a parachute jump later that night.

A fighter pilot can crash anywhere. A pararescueman not only has to get there, whether by air, land or sea, but be able to extract the aviator, provide critical medical treatment, and in some cases hoist the patient to a hovering helicopter under a barrage of enemy fire.

Acquiring those skills requires surviving a training pipeline as long as 27 months. Those who finish often say survival depends on the state of mind with which they enter.

“Failure was never an option. I never understood the concept of failing, and I was lucky the stars were aligned for me to have no injuries,” Sergeant Smith explained. He credits his upbringing in a small farming town of about 13,000 people where “family values and the work ethic are very strong.”

Still, there were days when the going was especially trying. In those instances, Sergeant Smith told himself, “They're not going to do anything to kill me.” He focused on surviving “day-by-day, and sometimes minute-by-minute.”

After graduating from technical

school and donning the distinctive maroon beret that signifies him as a PJ, Sergeant Smith entered a new type of pipeline — nonstop training and real-world deployments. He did seven tours in the desert within his first three years. To maintain proficiency, PJs can find themselves honing their rock climbing in Austria, practicing water rescue in the rugged North Sea off the coast of Scotland, or keeping busy by spending a few weeks with an ambulance crew in New Orleans treating gunshot wounds and other forms of violent injuries.

“I never do the same thing over again,” Sergeant Smith said. That in-

## Career Field Stats

**AFSC:** 1T2X1, Pararescue **Assigned:** 387

**Duties:** Performs, plans, leads, supervises, instructs and evaluates pararescue activities. Performs as the essential surface, air link in personnel recovery and material recovery by functioning as the rescue and recovery specialist on flying status as mission crew or as surface elements. Provides rapid response capability and operates in the six geographic disciplines: mountain, desert, arctic, urban, jungle and water, day or night, to include friendly, denied, hostile or sensitive areas.

**Civilian application:** Aspects of the PJ career field have civilian application such as paramedics who respond to emergency situations by helicopter or ambulance.

cludes real-world experiences such as his participation in the 2002 rescue of a missionary taken hostage by insurgents in the Philippines in 2001. Sergeant Smith was there to treat her gunshot wounds and broken bones as

she was transported aboard a military aircraft to a hospital.

And then there was his most memorable event when he and his crew assisted in airlifting a pregnant woman from a small island off the coast of South Korea during a nasty storm. It was a breach birth, and Sergeant Smith was halfway through the delivery when the helicopter landed at a hospital in Seoul. The infant boy survived.

## Sacrifice

There is a sacrifice one makes as a PJ. Sergeant Smith said he averages about 280 days on the road each year either training or deployed — this year was closer to 300. He married his high school sweetheart, and they have two small children.

“It's a hard career field for families. I was lucky,” he said. “She loves what I do for a living. Without her support, there's no way I could do it.”

It's also hard on fellow PJs when they lose one of their own. Sergeant Smith has lost 13 friends the past 11 years in a career field that consists of only 387 Airmen.

But it's been worth it, he said, because of the camaraderie and chance to help people in need. He plans to stick around for 30 years and hopes to one day become superintendent of a pararescue team.

“I enjoy my job so much it's worth sticking around for,” he said. 🦋

***Kneeling beneath the glow*** of an evening sky in Djibouti, Staff Sgt. Joshua Smith wears the tools of the trade that identify him as a pararescueman. Travel to exotic locales such as Africa is common, but still a thrilling part of the job that keeps the native of Forest Grove, Ore., on the road an average of 280 days a year.

